

“Unwrapping the Gift”

I

It was the single most exciting thing that had ever happened to her; the greatest Christmas gift that she had ever received.

Or so she assumed.

She was a perceptive child, and in her six brief years on this earth, she had already begun to notice the regular and settled pattern of things. The sun always rises in the east, Sunday dinner is always at Nana’s after church and Santa *always* delivers the presents on Christmas Eve, long after little children have been safely tucked into bed.

But not this time, not this present. This one arrived a full seven days before Christmas. One morning she woke up, wandered sleepily down the stairs, and saw it sitting there under the tree. Her heart skipped a beat when she realized that the mysterious package had her name on it. Brightly wrapped with a beautiful bow, it read in big bold letters: SPECIAL DELIVERY FROM THE NORTH POLE. And then, emphatically: **DO NOT OPEN UNTIL CHRISTMAS**. Clearly Santa was up to something *big*.

That week crawled by at a snail’s pace. She passed the long empty hours carefully studying the gift: examining the pattern on the wrapping paper, holding it up to consider its weight, lifting it to her ear and shaking it ever so gently. But it was no use. By Christmas Eve, she was still puzzled and perplexed and consumed with anticipation.

On Christmas morning, she knew what she had to do. Racing to the tree, she ripped off the ribbon and tore eagerly through the wrapping paper until at last her frenzied activity uncovered a big, shiny...lump of coal.

And then she burst into tears.

In the investigation which ensued, her parents determined that the package had its origin, not at the North Pole, but in the sick and twisted minds of her older siblings. Her only brother and only sister had conspired together, acquired the coal, wrapped it in the best paper they could find, gleefully scrawled her name on the tag and then placed it under the tree.

It was a cruel prank. But my little sister learned a valuable lesson on Christmas Day, 1984: Until you actually unwrap the gift, you really do not know what you’ve got. Is that a cashmere sweater...or another set of long underwear? The keys to a new Lexus...or a 2-dollar pair of earrings? Is it just the thing you’ve been waiting for...or just another big disappointment? There is only one way to find out. You have to unwrap the gift.

And I think the same thing goes for the greatest gift of all –you know, the big one, the one we celebrate at Christmas. “*To us a child is born, to us a son is given...*” But what does that *mean*? And when we welcome this birth, exactly what are we getting ourselves into? Do we even have a clue?

There is only one way to find out. We have to unwrap the gift.

II

This reading from the Gospel of Matthew used to not be included in the lectionary. The church just skipped right over it.¹ I can’t say I’m surprised. It’s not

exactly Christmas pageant fodder –it would have to be rated PG-13, at least; it is filled with terrible violence and gut-wrenching fear.

Matthew’s second chapter opens with some familiar material. After Jesus is born in Bethlehem, wise men from the East come to pay him homage with gold, frankincense, myrrh –all that stuff. But here is the part you may have missed in Sunday School: The “wise men”? Not so wise. In their search for the child, they manage to tip off King Herod, and so set in motion a horrific chain of events.

When Jesus was born, Herod the Great, a notorious and bloodthirsty tyrant, ruled over Israel as a puppet of the Roman Empire. Herod did what he had to do to ascend to the throne, and he had a reputation for doing away with anything or anyone threatening his grip on power.² So when the rumors reach his ears of a “newborn king of the Jews,” Herod does not run out to the mall and get some frankincense of his own. Herod gets scared. And when Herod gets scared, Herod falls back on the thing he knows best: brutal, indiscriminate violence.

So our passage opens with an angel’s urgent warning: “Get up Joseph, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, because Herod is looking for you.” No time for passports or visas or hotel reservations; the family grabs what it can and flees into the night –exiles, refugees, undocumented aliens in the land of Egypt. They will stay there until the danger has passed.

And the danger is all too real. Herod is out for blood. On his orders, Roman soldiers round up every male child under the age of two in the village of Bethlehem and put them to the sword. Even by the standards of Herod’s own track record, it is a shocking and atrocious act. But it sends a message that no one can miss: This is how the king will deal with any pretender to *his* throne. And it’s so awful, it’s so sick and sad, that Matthew thinks he hears Rachel, the mother of Israel, wailing for her slaughtered children, weeping and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.

Some time goes by—a couple of years, probably—and finally Herod dies. Again an angel appears to Joseph; again the family must get up and go. But the news from back home is not all good. Herod’s son is ruling in his place. Afraid to return to the scene of Jesus’ birth, the family instead decides to settle way up in Nazareth –an obscure little backwater burg, barely on the edge of civilization. In this out-of-the-way, insignificant village, Mary and Joseph will raise the child.

They must have wondered why it all turned out this way, but they never will know for certain. And they will never hear from the angels again. They were left to live with this strange and bewildering gift from God.

III

But that’s the thing. Sometimes, once you’ve unwrapped the gift and got a good look at it, you realize it’s not exactly what you had in mind.

In the 1st century, God’s people know exactly what they want from God. These people need a savior –not a “personal Lord and Savior” who lives in your heart and takes you to heaven when they die, but something a little more this-worldly: a knight in shining armor, a hero, a king, someone to smite the bad guys and punish their enemies and set things right. It really is the very least that God could do for them. For long decades God’s people have lived under oppression and foreign occupation. Herod is just the latest in a string of power-crazed, blood-thirsty borderline types who have subjected this

people to their own cruel and petty whims. Enough is enough. It is high time for God to step in and start taking names. These people need a savior.

But that is not what they get. And somewhere along the way—fleeing from Herod, hiding in Egypt, or maybe in those long quiet years after they had settled in Nazareth—at some point Mary and Joseph must have realized that, when they asked for a savior, this is not what they had in mind.

So what did they get? What is this gift? Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus is called *Emmanuel*, which means "God with us." And that is what Matthew means for us to see in this story: It's not about God suddenly solving all of our problems, or just handing us whatever it is we think we need. This is about God *with us*. In this tiny defenseless child, God is born into this world, lives a human life and one day will die a human death. In this child, God will walk in our shoes and live in our skin. God will know our life from the inside out.

It's not at all what we had in mind...but it may be just the thing that we need.

IV

Toward the end of his life, from the confines of a German prison cell where he was being held by the Gestapo for his resistance to Hitler's regime, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these words: "Only the suffering God can help."³ At its core—beneath all the accumulated layers of empty sentiment and crash commercialism and church tradition—at the heart of the matter, this is the message of Christmas: *God is no stranger to our suffering*. God suffers with us. And God's suffering saves us. In ways that I can not even begin to understand, the God we see in Jesus Christ—the God who is with us in this child—is a God who shares in our suffering.⁴ And someday God's suffering will make the world well.⁵

But that means Christmas can be a dangerous business. Simply put, there is no way to welcome this child without sharing in *his* suffering. Just ask Mary and Joseph. They signed up to raise a savior...and ended up living in exile, far from home and fearing for their lives.

And there is a lot more suffering where that came from. The child will always have enemies in high places. He will grow up, and wander around, and gather a small group of followers. He will say some things that sound pretty but aren't very practical: things about sharing our stuff and welcoming the outcast, loving our enemies and turning the other cheek. He will provoke the wrath of the powers that be. And where Herod has failed, others will seem to succeed. God's child will end up on a cross.

When this child lands in our laps, we really have no idea what we are in for. But this much we know for certain: God always get what God wants. And God wants us. From now on, our life is bound up in the life of this child—whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not. Like Mary and Joseph, we will share in the suffering that will save the world; each one of us will play our part in the redemption of all things.

Emmanuel, God with us. It is not what we had in mind...but it is exactly the thing we need.

Amen.

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Notes

¹ Or so I'm told. See the discussion in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary based on the NRSV –Year A*. Walter Brueggemann, et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p.64-72.

² Herod's ruthlessness is well established in the historical accounts of the time. See the entry "Herod" in *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*. Edited by Paul J. Achtemeier. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp.416-419.

³ As quoted by Jürgen Moltmann in "Only the Suffering God Can help" *The Cry: The Advocacy Journal of Word Made Flesh* vol. 7, no. 4 (Winter 2001).

⁴ One of the first real works of theology I ever read—and one that has shaped my theology ever since—is Jürgen Moltmann's *Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993). His contention that any Christian understanding of God must begin with the suffering of the crucified Christ is an important corrective to a Western theological tradition that has leaned heavily on Greek metaphysical ideas about the impassability or apathy of God. His perspective has influenced this sermon from beginning to end.

⁵ So Calvin sees in this story an anticipation of Christ's passion: "This flight is a part of the foolishness of the cross..." *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*. Volume I. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), p.155.